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Grace Bible Church, NY  
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Blessings and Curses  
Deuteronomy 27-28, Joshua 8:30-35; 23-24; Jeremiah 2:1-13

### **Introduction**

It is good to be back with you this morning after so much time away during my study trip to Israel. Thank you again for your generosity. It was a central part of the story of God's graciousness that I was able to repeat many times to others in explaining in how I became part of this particular trip with my Alma Mater, The Master's Seminary .

I first got a passport in 1985 in order to go on a study trip to Israel through the seminary extension I was attending, but unexpected expenses prevented me from going. The same thing was true many other times that opportunities arose for me to go to Israel. I eventually figured that I would just have to wait for the Millennium to see it after the Lord returned and remade it. I did take a class in seminary on the geography and history of the land that proved to be very valuable over the years, and while I am very glad for the many maps and slides we studied, your generosity enabled me to actually be in those locations which is far superior. That class taken over 30 years ago helped me make the most of this trip to see the actual sites.

Another aspect of God's graciousness to me was in the encouragement I received from Diane to go. We looked into several options for ways that she could accompany me, but finally concluded that the physical demands of the trip would be too much for her. She then unselfishly encouraged me to go on this trip since it was a much more extensive 20 day trip visiting many more sites and studying much more in depth the places we would go. She did this even though it meant I would be away for both our 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary and her birthday. She is a gift of God's grace to me.

The trip was extensive traveling from the southern most point of Israel at Eilat on the Red Sea to Dan and the Golan Heights on the border of Lebanon and Syria, and from the Mediterranean Coast and both Ashkelon and Caesarea to the Jordan River and only feet from the border of the country of Jordan. We spent three days walking the streets of the Old City in Jerusalem and two more days in the areas immediately north and south in the Hill country before heading out for a day in the five valleys of what is called the Shephelah and then the coastal plain, then south through the Negev, the Wilderness of Zin, the Wilderness of Paran and into the lower area of the Jordan Rift Valley called the Aravah. Two days were spent in that valley exploring places such as Masada, the Dead Sea, Ein Gedi, and Qumran. Another day was spent at Caesarea on the coast and then up to the Jezreel Valley with the night spent at Nazareth. The next several days were spent in the area of New Testament Galilee where Jesus spent the bulk of His life on this earth. A final day traveling down the Jordan Valley to Jericho and then back to facilities as Yad Ha Shmonah where IBEx (Israel Bible Extension of The Master's University) so that we could take our final exams the next morning. (Yes, I had to take the exams too, but the pressure was off because I was not taking the class for credit so the grade was not important). And with all of that, we only scratched the surface of what could be studied in Israel.

With over 3,000 photos I cannot even do a travelogue of my trip much less explain the many things we studied while there. I will present a brief synopsis of the trip on Sunday evening, June 25 at 6 pm, and if there is interest, I am willing to teach a Monday Night Summer Class series on Israel's geography and archeological sites starting June 19. If that would be of interest to you, just let me know after the service, drop a note in the faith box, email me or call me.

## **Israel Trip Reflections**

This morning I want to reflect briefly on my trip and then focus on something that kept running through my mind as we went from site to site and traveled the various regions of Israel. The most common questions asked after such a trip are: What was most meaningful to you? What did you like the most? Has it helped you draw closer to God? And, What was it like to be in places where Jesus walked?

Let me answer the last two questions first. While the trip did fulfill a dream I did not think would happen in my lifetime and there were many things related to the trip that were deeply meaningful and helpful in my walk and understanding of God, being in Israel itself did not do that. In fact, I would say that the pace was so fast that it was hard to even keep up a routine of devotions. I was very grateful for Dr. Grisanti's devotions from Proverbs each morning and his thoughtful comments about Biblical texts as we examined various archeological sites. There was not time to sit and contemplate being in a particular place Jesus or any of a number of other people recorded in the Scriptures would have been. Perhaps if I could have sat for a while in some of those locations my experience would have been different, but then, my own faith and perhaps personality are not attuned to what is important to those in liturgical religions in which location and artifacts are important.

For example, I was at the Church of the Holy Sepulcher which according to archeology is the site of Jesus crucifixion and burial. The site has been made gaudy by the churches controlling it so that it is hard to even imagine what it looked like then, but to many it is very important and provides a mystical experience to physically touch the rock outcropping on which the cross would have stood, or even kiss or lick the slab on which Jesus' body was prepared for burial. For some, those things become a touchstone upon which their faith is strengthened, and if so, the Lord bless them and draw them closer to the reality of Himself in daily life. For myself, it is much more meaningful to sit here in this church and contemplate Jesus' death, burial and resurrection during communion, for my faith is solidly in the person of Jesus Christ and not the places of the events of His life. It is the blessing Jesus said of those who unlike Thomas believed though they had not seen (John 20:29).

It was wonderful to be in places such as Galilee where Jesus would have looked upon the same hillsides and taught in some of the synagogues whose ruins we visited, and those things are an encouragement to faith, but my faith was already strong believing that Jesus is with me always and that everything I see has already been seen by Him since He is the creator. I was more astounded by that fact that so many archaeologists who have dug up such sites and touched the things people mentioned in the Bible would have touched can walk away without faith in the truth of the word of God. The blindness of sin runs deep in the hearts of men - and women - who refuse to believe what is right in front of them. I am also amazed by how many that claim to believe the Scriptures are quick to yield to the conclusions of archeologists that do not. The scriptures have yet to be proven untrue by archeology, but the continual uncovering of ancient sites have proved many archeologists to be wrong.

I will give more of my reflective thoughts when I present some of my pictures in a couple of weeks, but this is a good place for me to transition to something that was on my mind a lot during my travels. The land of Israel with its many archeological sites and also in its current state proclaims loudly the patience and grace of God and also His holiness and justice. What do I mean by that? God's grace is seen in His choosing a people for Himself and bringing them to and establishing them in a land promised to their forefather, Abraham. His patience is seen in His longsuffering their disobedience and outward rebellion before His holiness was finally affronted to the point that His justice was brought forth to fulfill the curses that were promised to come if they did not follow Him. Turn to Deuteronomy 27-28

## **Blessings and Curses - Deuteronomy 27-28**

Let me give you a quick overview of the history leading up to this passage. In Genesis 12 God chooses Abram and blesses him with a three-fold promise of land, a large number of descendants, and that through a particular descendant the world would be blessed. In Genesis 15 this promise was

repeated and then confirmed unilaterally by God. Details were given concerning the particular lands that Abraham's descendants would receive and the timing of it. They would first spend four hundred years in a different land while the sin of the Canaanites reached its peak. That in itself is God's mercy to pagans whom He did not have destroyed until their sins multiplied and became intolerable. Those promises were repeated to Abraham's son, Isaac, and then to his grandson, Jacob.

In God's providence, Jacob's son, Joseph, was taken as a slave to Egypt where through God's intervention in enabling him to interpret dreams, Joseph was able to explain Pharaoh's dream and reveal the coming famine. Pharaoh made Joseph second in command of all of Egypt and he prepared and enabled the nation to survive the famine. This was also the means by which his father Jacob and the rest of the extended family came to Egypt. They enjoyed the best of the land for a long time until a Pharaoh arose that did not remember Joseph and the history of what he had done. Pharaoh oppressed the Israelites until God raised up Moses and delivered them through plagues that destroyed Egyptian power. The children of Israel saw miracle after miracle both in Egypt and in traveling to Mt. Sinai where they received God's law and His promises. It did not take long to demonstrate that they still did not trust God and would not obey Him as they should resulting in the first generation being condemned to wander in the wilderness until all those of that generation 20 years and older died off. Deuteronomy is the restating of God's law to the second generation before they entered the promised land. In chapters 27 & 28 Moses instructs them about what they were to do once they entered the land and before they dispersed to the territories set aside for each tribe. They were to gather at Shechem which is at the juncture of Mt Ebal and Mt Gerizim. This was the site at which Abram had built an altar to the Lord (Genesis 12:6-7). Jacob also lived there for awhile with his family after purchasing land from the Canaanites and building an altar there (Genesis 33:18f).

Once they had gathered there, they were set up large stones on which they were to write the words of the law, then build an altar and offer sacrifices of peace offerings (vs. 2-8). Then half the tribes were to stand on Mt. Ebal and half on Mt Gerizim with the Levites in between who were to then repeat the words of the blessings to those on Mt. Gerizim and the curses to those on Mt Ebal (vs. 12-14). After each statement the people were to respond with "amen" in agreement with the pronouncement of the blessing or curse.

They were to begin with the curses on those that committed idolatry (vs. 15), dishonored parents (vs. 16), moved boundary markers (vs. 17), mislead the blind (vs. 18), distorted justice (vs. 19), committed sexual immorality (vs. 20-23), would strike a neighbor in secret (vs. 24), would accept a bribe (vs. 25), or would not confirm the words of the law by doing them (vs. 26).

Deuteronomy 28:1-14 gives the blessings. Follow along as I read. 1 *"Now it shall be, if you diligently obey the LORD your God, being careful to do all His commandments which I command you today, the LORD your God will set you high above all the nations of the earth. 2 "All these blessings will come upon you and overtake you if you obey the LORD your God: 3 "Blessed shall you be in the city, and blessed shall you be in the country. 4 "Blessed shall be the offspring of your body and the produce of your ground and the offspring of your beasts, the increase of your herd and the young of your flock. 5 "Blessed shall be your basket and your kneading bowl. 6 "Blessed shall you be when you come in, and blessed shall you be when you go out. 7 "The LORD shall cause your enemies who rise up against you to be defeated before you; they will come out against you one way and will flee before you seven ways. 8 "The LORD will command the blessing upon you in your barns and in all that you put your hand to, and He will bless you in the land which the LORD your God gives you. 9 "The LORD will establish you as a holy people to Himself, as He swore to you, if you keep the commandments of the LORD your God and walk in His ways. 10 "So all the peoples of the earth will see that you are called by the name of the LORD, and they will be afraid of you. 11 "The LORD will make you abound in prosperity, in the offspring of your body and in the offspring of your beast and in the produce of your ground, in the land which the LORD swore to your fathers to give you. 12 "The LORD will open for you*

*His good storehouse, the heavens, to give rain to your land in its season and to bless all the work of your hand; and you shall lend to many nations, but you shall not borrow. 13 “The LORD will make you the head and not the tail, and you only will be above, and you will not be underneath, if you listen to the commandments of the LORD your God, which I charge you today, to observe them carefully, 14 and do not turn aside from any of the words which I command you today, to the right or to the left, to go after other gods to serve them.*

Starting in verse 15 they were to go over the consequences of the curses for not observing God’s commandments and statutes. In summary, they are the exact opposite of the blessings and given in great detail about what would happen and the order in which it would happen. None of it is good, but it begins with curses that should have gotten their attention and ends with destruction and deportation. The curses in verses 16-24 are the Lord withholding His goodness and striking them with famine and plagues, and while those are bad, they are as David said to Gad in 2 Samuel 24:14, *“Let us now fall into the hand of the Lord for His mercies are great, but do not let me fall into the hand of man.”* But the curses escalate starting in verse 27-35 with being oppressed by other nations, and culminating in deportation in verses 36-27. This cycle repeats itself in the rest of the chapter but the plagues from the Lord, the oppression by other nations and deportations continues to get worse until those that survive are in dread of both day and night. Verse 67 predicting that they would say in the morning, *“Would that it were evening !”* and at evening, *“would that it were morning!”* because of the dread of their hearts and the sights that they would see. Yet, even in the worst of what was promised to come for disobedience there would be hope for Deuteronomy 30 promised a future restoration even after deportation. The issue would be simply one of repentance and obedience from the heart.

Moses’ encouragement in Deuteronomy 30:11-14 is significant because it points out that what was being commanded was possible for those that would *“circumcise their heart”* as he expressed it in Deuteronomy 10:16. <sup>11</sup> *“For this commandment which I command you today is not too difficult for you, nor is it out of reach. 12 “It is not in heaven, that you should say, ‘Who will go up to heaven for us to get it for us and make us hear it, that we may observe it?’ 13 “Nor is it beyond the sea, that you should say, ‘Who will cross the sea for us to get it for us and make us hear it, that we may observe it?’ 14 “But the word is very near you, in your mouth and in your heart, that you may observe it.*

Joshua 8:30-35 records that Joshua and that second generation did do what Moses commanded and gathered at Shechem to build an altar, offer sacrifices and have the law written down on stones there. Half of the tribes stood on Mt. Gerizim and half on Mt. Ebal while the Levites repeated the blessings and the curses and the people said “amen.” This was done just as Moses had commanded. All they had conquered to that point was Jericho and the area from Ai to Shechem. They had not yet conquered any of the territory to the south or the north.

As Joshua was approaching his time in which he would go “the way of all the earth” (Joshua 23:14), he gathered the people once again to Shechem where Joshua 24 records he reviewed their history of what God had done for them both in Egypt, the wilderness wanderings and in conquering the land. He then charged them in verses 14-15, <sup>14</sup> *“Now, therefore, fear the LORD and serve Him in sincerity and truth; and put away the gods which your fathers served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD. 15 “If it is disagreeable in your sight to serve the LORD, choose for yourselves today whom you will serve: whether the gods which your fathers served which were beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD.”*

It seems incredible that even after all that the people had seen the Lord do, they still had to be warned to put away their idols and challenged to serve the Lord instead of them, yet this was the indicator of what was to come. The people said they would obey, and according to Judges 2:7 that generation did as did those who were alive during the days of the elders that had served with Joshua and had seen all these things. But the next generation did not and the cycle of disobedience, curses, oppression, repentance and deliverance began. It continued all the way through the time of the Judges and continued through the

time of the Kings of Judah. Blessings came under good kings that lead the people in following the Lord, and curses came under bad kings that led the people in disobeying the Lord. And after the nation split in two, there were only bad kings in the northern kingdom of Israel.

What is truly amazing is God's patience when they were disobedient. He sent prophet after prophet to warn the people of the consequences of continued disobedience and the blessing of repentance and obedience. Occasionally they listened, and like Nineveh at the preaching of Jonah, there was repentance and reprieve. More often they did not listen and the curses came as promised. With such a profound history you would think they would learn, and especially the southern kingdom of Judah after the northern kingdom of Israel had been destroyed and the people deported by Shalmaneser King of Assyria. 2 Kings 17:7-41 even records why Israel fell and was deported and the consequences.

Hezekiah, King of Judah paid attention and saw the Lord deliver him in a mighty way only eight years later when Sennacherib had become king of Assyria and attacked Judah. The Lord fulfilled his prophecy through Isaiah and did put a hook in Sennacherib's nose and turned him back after the angel of the Lord struck down 185,000 of the camp of the Assyrians. Sennacherib was then assassinated by his sons as he worshiped his false god. Hezekiah got it, but his son and grandson did not plummeting Judah into unforgivable idolatry and wretchedness. Even the brief revival under Josiah could not stem the tide of evil and the consequences of its curses. This brings us to the evil hearts exposed in Jeremiah 2 in the final warnings to Judah's last kings.

### **Evil Hearts - Jeremiah 2**

In this chapter Jeremiah exposes Judah's apostasy in turning against the Lord who had done so much for them. They sought other gods that were not gods and could not profit. Then in verse 13 he uses a description that becomes very apparent when traveling through the land of Israel. *"For My people have committed two evils: They have forsaken Me, The fountain of living waters, To hew for themselves cisterns, Broken cisterns That can hold no water."*

Much of Israel is an arid land with almost all of the rain coming in only a few months. Rivers and springs were major factors in where humans would establish farms, villages, cities and forts. Water from rivers and springs would be referred to as "living water" because it was fresh and clean. Water would be captured during the rainy season and stored in cisterns which were essentially holes carved in rock and then coated with lime plaster to keep the water in. Cisterns enabled many places to be inhabited that could not otherwise support life during the Summer. Jeremiah's description of their evil in forsaking the Lord is graphically presented in this analogy. It was akin to leaving a lush area with a free flowing stream or spring and instead going to a dry area in which the water would be the stagnant and often foul water of a cistern, but even worse, of a broken cistern in which all the water leaked out so that there was nothing. Stagnant water may be unpleasant and even bring sickness, but no water brings death.

Israel's history is recorded in the archeological sites throughout its land. Though they are ruins now, there were once beautiful buildings, palaces and thriving economies to support them. Israel's political power and influence expanded when they were obedient and blessed, but contracted when they were disobedient and cursed. The ruins tell the story of rise and fall, expansion and collapse, of blessing and curses. Within those ruins are the evidences of syncretism in which the worship of the true God was mixed with pagan practices and even pagan God's. Double standing stones representing God and his consort at an altar that was not even supposed to be in a Solomonic outpost. Mosaics of Greek gods such as Pan or Medusa or even the Greek astrological chart as decorations in Jewish synagogues. Had they become poly-theistic or were they just being sensitive to Greek "seekers." Either way, they wanted to worship God as they chose instead of how God directed them and they were cursed for it.

### **An Example to Heed - 1 Corinthians 10:1-13**

In 1 Corinthians 10 the apostle Paul warns us that the things that happened to the nation of Israel

were written down as a warning not to be like them. Looking at the ruins of ancient Israel is a stark reminder of this truth. God still gives blessings to those that will follow Him to obey His will. He still curses those that will not and that includes those that compromise His truth in order to gain favor with people or that replace God's word with the traditions of man.

In the days that I walked around in the Old City of Jerusalem, I was struck by the various people I saw in it. There were many whose demeanor and dress identified them as being secular. Merchants hawking their wares. Shoppers looking for good deals. Tourists taking in the sites. Students figuring out the history exposed in the ruins. Many others were obviously there on a religious pilgrimage since Jerusalem is a focal point of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Many different sects could be quickly identified by their particular dress. Each believes they have the truth and sacrifice greatly to follow the teachings of their particular branch of their religion. Yet each has traded the wisdom of God for the musings of men. The Bible is given a back seat to books written by mere men whether they be those of Islam, Judaism or Christianity. The traditions of their fathers replace the teaching of the Father.

Many were obviously very sincere such as the Hasidic Jew that I saw having quite a physical workout as he prayed at the western wall desiring God to hear him. Muslims were calling out their prayers five times a day. There were all sorts of clergy, priests and nuns in their particular attire, and throngs of common people who endured long lines to touch something they believed to be sacred in the quest to gain a blessing. It all made me sad to see them working so hard to gain God's favor and still blind to the fact that God is close and not far away, or as the invitation in James 4:8 states it, *"Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded."* It is a matter of humility and faith. Humility to acknowledge your personal sinfulness and repent of it. Faith to believe that Jesus is God in human flesh who lived a sinless life and willingly died on the cross as the substitute payment for man's sin, then was raised from the dead on the third day proving His promise to redeem, forgive and save those who follow Him are true. We are looking forward to His promised return and future kingdom.

It is sad how many people who sincerely seek God still miss the truth because it has been mixed with other stuff. Do not be like them. Do not allow the truth to be mixed with error. Do not compromise God's word with anything. We are to follow the Lord Jesus Christ and not men no matter how intelligent or articulate or degrees they have earned. Hold fast with confidence that what God has revealed is true even if it makes every man a liar (Romans 3:4), but to do that, you will need to know the Scriptures. Strive to be a workman who can accurately handle the word of truth and so is not ashamed (2 Timothy 2:15) and cannot be led astray.

Let me close by saying that if you get the opportunity to go to Israel, it is well worth it, but study what you will be seeing before you go so that unbelieving tour guides and signs do not fool you. And you cannot go, don't worry. It will be even more beautiful in the Millennium when it is rebuilt after its destruction in the tribulation and when Jesus will be seated on the throne of David.

(No Sermon Notes sheet)